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Predictions and Timing in an Olympic Year

April 10, 2008 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

[Note: in the past, several *China Beat* postings have been brought to the attention of new audiences by being reposted (with attribution) on the History News Network website, a wonderful online resource for the historically minded. With this piece, we are reversing the process, as a slightly shorter version of what follows—number 4 on the prediction list has been added for the *China Beat* version—appeared a few days ago as an HNN original.]

Let's pretend that, twelve months ago, someone had put me in a room with 20 or so other China specialists, handed us each four slips of paper, and asked us to write on each piece a story with a Chinese theme that we predicted would make headlines in 2008, the year when the Beijing Olympics will start on August 8. It's quite possible that the following would have happened:

- 1) One or more of us would have written that a headline-grabbing protest would break out. And going into more detail, some of those who made that forecast would have added this detail—that the authorities, unusually concerned with global public relations in China's Olympic year, would respond less quickly and less harshly to this oppositional act than they would have at another point in time, though in the end repression would come.
- 2) Other slips of paper would have forecast that an individual foreigner or group of foreigners would disrupt an Olympic ceremony in an effort to draw attention to a human rights issue. (That would probably have been something I would have written down myself.)
- 3) Some of us would have predicted that, at some point during the year, the Chinese blogosphere would be filled with complaints that the Western media had been biased in its coverage of an event involving China.
- 4) At least one or two of us would have speculated that plans would be discussed about the wisdom of handling things differently in upcoming Olympics, due to things that had occurred during the 2008 ones.

Now, the four main predictions mentioned above have all come true during the last couple of weeks (as has the prediction within a prediction about how the authorities would respond to unrest). But if you gathered that imaginary group together again to talk about the situation, I don't think any of us would be feeling that our clairvoyance had been demonstrated.

Why? Timing.

If we were honest, we would have to admit that, when making our most on-target predictions, we were writing about things we expected to take place in August of 2008, not March. I know that whenever I have mentioned to someone that I wouldn't be surprised if an individual or small group of people, probably from a country other than China, used an Olympic ritual to draw attention to a human rights issue, I have been thinking about what could happen in Beijing during the open ceremonies. Or, a la the 1968 Black Power salute in Mexico City, while a medal is being awarded.

Similarly, while it seemed most likely that plans to alter the pattern for future Olympics would wait until the Games actually took place, there is already much discussion of how, in the future,

the torch relay should be handled differently, due to how fraught the route has become this time around. Some have suggested the relay should be abandoned completely, others that it should revert from being an around-the-world event to one that just goes from Olympia to the host city. And so on.

The rest of the lead-up to the Olympics will undoubtedly include dramatic moments. Some completely unexpected things will surely take place, as well as some things that are more predictable, but which may serve to surprise us, due to the precise form they take or timing of their occurrence. But the event-filled last few weeks have sometimes left me with the strange sensation that China's much-anticipated Olympic moment, rather than still being in the offing, has already come and gone. The one thing that virtually no one would have predicted a year ago is that the opening ceremony scheduled for 08/08/08 and the Games that follow would have the potential to feel anticlimactic, the coverage them merely a rehash of familiar stories. But this is now within the realm of possibility.

This is nothing, though, compared to the situation with the other big Chinese mega-event on the horizon, about which there will be much more international media attention once the Games have ended: the Shanghai World Expo set to start in 2010.

This first World's Fair for the country is being eagerly anticipated in China, and especially in the city that will host it. This is to be expected, at least by those who know their history. Expos may seem passé to people living in Western nations that hosted their first World's Fairs more than a century ago. But when the first American ones were held in Philadelphia in 1876 and Chicago in 1893, they were a very big deal indeed, moment of intense local and also national pride, which symbolized that the United States and its leading cities could hold their own in any international arena.

The thing about the Shanghai Expo is that the city already looks in many ways more like one that recently held a World's Fair than like one gearing up to hold such an event. For example, it already has state-of-the-art architectural landmarks (like the Jinmao Tower and the Shanghai Museum) that look like the kinds of structures erected especially for a World's Fair (think of the Crystal Palace). And in the Maglev, it has a iconic—if contested—novel mode of transportation, of the sort that sometimes debuts during a World Fair (as the moving walkway did at the Paris Exposition of 1900).

Still, just as the 2008 Games may still surprise us in the end, the 2010 Expo could manage to make a novel imprint on the already landmark-filled Shanghai cityscape. For after all, Paris as it geared up for the 1889 Exposition also looked like a city that had already hosted a World's Fair—naturally enough, as two had been held there previously, in 1855 and 1867. Yet that year's fair, thanks to a tower built by a man named Eiffel, left an already landmark-filled cityscape forever transformed.

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